

CHARACTER EDUCATION AND SCHOOL CLIMATE

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Character Education and School Climate

THESIS

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By

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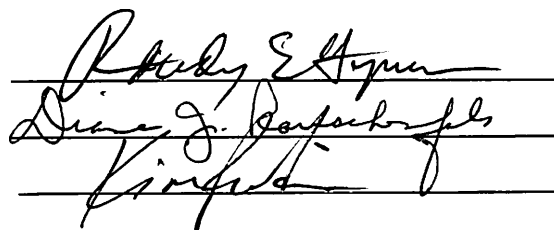
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The image shows three handwritten signatures, each written on a horizontal line. The first signature is 'R. Kelly E. Thompson', the second is 'Diane J. Garfinkel', and the third is 'Linda L. ...'.

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Abstract

Character Education and School Climate was a qualitative study which used the thoughts and ideas of third, fourth, and fifth graders from two rural Northwest Wisconsin elementary schools over the past five years. The students reported on their feelings regarding school, including what they liked and what they would change. Their answers to those questions were studied for common themes taught during character education lessons. Results of this study emphasize the importance of creating and maintaining a positive school climate by providing students with a direct education of character traits.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Long before Theodore Roosevelt mused, "To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society" (thinkexist.com), there was the belief that there was more to education than strictly academics. Since the teachings of Plato and the beginnings of public education, schools had been seen as the foundation of teaching character to children (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Glanzer & Milson, 2006; Prestwich, 2004). Throughout the years, the importance of character education had waxed and waned, however, in today's times the value of teaching character has again come to the forefront. Character education has now become the fastest growing reform movement in education today (Prestwich, 2004).

There were many questions surrounding the value of character education. Because of the focus on student achievement, safety, and connectedness to school, schools were looking to decipher the value of character education in relation to academic performance and school climate (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn & Smith, 2006; Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Cohen, 2006). This study examined possible relationships between character education and school climate.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if character education played a role in elementary students' feelings about their school. Character education has had multiple definitions but in this study character education was defined as a number of pre-determined themes such as respect and responsibility that were looked for in the students' responses. Students' feelings about school were called school climate and

were shown through student responses to two questions: (1) What do you like about this school? (2) What do you wish were different about this school? Responses from four years of surveys were analyzed to determine if there was any relationship between character education and school climate.

Background

The U.S. Department of Education stated in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation that grants were available through the Partnerships in Character Education Program. NCLB also provided financial support to school districts, “to support programs that prevent violence in and around schools; that prevent the illegal use of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs; that involve parents and communities; and that are coordinated with related Federal, State, school, and community efforts and resources to foster a safe and drug-free learning environment that supports student academic achievement” (US Dept, of Ed., 2004). A survey of character education legislation showed 26 states had some form of character education legislation (Glanzer & Milson, 2006), and research said that there was some form of character education being taught throughout all 50 states (Prestwich, 2004). In 1996, Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction issued a Citizenship Initiative, which included standards of the heart in addition to teaching standards. This initiative included specific characteristics of schools that build citizens. One of the strategies suggested to help build these citizens was character education (WI Dept, of Public Instruction, 2008). The Center for Social and Emotional Education (CSEE) described their goal as “to promote positive and sustained school climate” (CSEE). The CSEE website went on to say that integrating character education and social and emotional learning into

schools was the right way to work towards that goal. Merle J. Schwartz, the Character Education Partnership's (CEP) Director of Education and Research wrote on the CEP website (2008) that when looking at emerging topics in character education, "as quality character educators, we shine our flashlights on three major areas..." with one of those major emerging areas being school climate and culture. Clearly, character education and school climate were two of the top educational buzz words right now. However, with all the speculation about the benefits of character education when trying to improve school climate, there were few studies that specifically looked at the effect of character education on school climate. With government and legislation stressing the importance of character and climate in schools, this study seemed necessary to look for connections between them.

Setting

For the past four years, students in two rural Northwestern Wisconsin elementary schools have been surveyed on their feelings about their school experiences. The schools are part of the same district. Each year there are approximately 100 combined students per grade level, with third, fourth, and fifth grades being surveyed. Students took the survey on-line in a computer lab during a regularly scheduled Guidance class.

Assumptions

As the Elementary Counselor for the above-mentioned school district, I had a vested interest in the results of this study. I have taught character education lessons to all the students in these schools as a part of the Guidance curriculum. School climate data was one way the district and the state determined the strengths and needs of

schools, grade levels, classrooms, and students. In my experience as a school counselor of seven years, I believed that if the students felt safe and happy at school, then academics, behaviors, and social relationships within the school all improved. As a district we adopted a Character Education policy, which stated that all children would be taught some form of character education. I felt it was important to determine if there was any correlation between the character education the students were receiving and their perceptions of and feelings about day-to-day life at school. Because I provided the delivery of these lessons, I certainly was biased by my hope that these lessons were indeed affecting the climate of the schools. However, my major concern was that if these lessons were not positively affecting school climate or even worse, causing a more negative outlook about school, then the results of this study could provide an impetus for change.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. The character education program that was used within this school district was one that was compiled by the school counselor. Therefore, the results of this study were showing relationships between the character education delivered to upper elementary students in this district and how those students felt about school. There were other packaged and homegrown character education programs used throughout the country and other school climate surveys that may ask different types of questions. Results provided by this study were specific to this district and may or may not be true of other district's character education and school climate relationships. What this study delivered was another

piece of the puzzle connecting character education in schools and its effect, if any, on school climate.

Definitions

- Character Education - This phrase can mean many different things depending on where you look. Thomas Lickona was often referenced for his definition of character education. In *Politics in Character Education*, Howard, et. al (2004) provide Lickona's (1989) definition ...

Character consists of . . . values in action. Character . . . has three interrelated parts: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral behavior. Good character consists of knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good—habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of action. We want our children. . . to judge what is right, care deeply about what is right, and then do what they believe to be right—even in the face of pressure from without and temptation from within, (p.190)

In this study, themes of respect, kindness, caring, acceptance, fairness, honesty, generosity, appreciation, and responsibility were used when looking for effects of character education in student responses.

- School Climate - School climate can include many aspects of the social and learning environment of the school. Feelings of safety, relationships with staff and students, types and quality of learning and teaching, and the physical environment were all pieces that came together to contribute to the climate of a school (CSEE, 2009). How a student felt about these components was what

this study looked for to determine how a student felt and perceived his/her school.

Summary

Martin Luther King, Jr. when discussing the topic of thinking said, “Intelligence plus character - that is the true goal of education” (thinkexist.com). People have always known there is more to education than reading, writing, and arithmetic. Today’s schools must focus not only on the academic achievement of students but their social and emotional success as well. Character education had been one strategy to provide students an opportunity to become a citizen who thought about what was right and good, made decisions based on that knowledge, and then took action. If character education focused on values and making each student a better person, then it would follow that the climate of a school that delivered character education to the students would be positive and caring. This study looked to discover if character education is related to school climate as evidenced by students’ responses on a school climate survey.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Character education has been around since the beginning of time and throughout the years has fallen in and out of favor depending on political and societal climate (Prestwich, 2004). Since the early 1900s, character education was determined to be an important part of education. However in the 1930s, character education's popularity began to fade and didn't really come back to the spotlight until the 1980s when the view was that America was in moral decay and prevention programs were the solution (Vessels & Boyd, 1996). In President Clinton's 1997 State of the Union Address he said, "Character education must be taught in our schools. We must teach children to be good citizens" (Babeau, Rest, Narvaez, 1999, p.18). Currently, No Child Left Behind legislation, the U.S. Department of Education, and the National Education Association all have called for schools to not only contribute to student's academic achievement but to their character development as well (Benninga et al, 2006).

Depending on whom you ask, character education means many different things. According to Benninga et al. (2006), "Character education can be defined in terms of relationship virtues (e.g., respect, fairness, civility, tolerance), self-oriented virtues (e.g., fortitude, self-discipline, effort, perseverance) or a combination of the two" (p.449). Schwartz, Beatty, and Dachnowicz (2006) defined character education as, "...often the umbrella term that describes concerted efforts to teach a number of qualities, such as civic virtues, respect and responsibility, social and emotional learning, empathy and caring, tolerance for diversity, and service to the community"

(p.26). Many researchers in the field subscribed to an overarching, comprehensive definition that described the purpose of character education as the development of students' cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral abilities. School was not just for producing students that could read and write; instead, educational focus was now on educating students for responsible citizenship and lifelong success (Glanzer & Milson, 2006; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg & Walberg, 2004).

Benefits of Character Education

Why was all of this so important? In a society where school violence, tobacco and alcohol use among underage students, and bullying were on the rise and unacceptable and inappropriate student behavior was increasing, there needed to be a nationwide, conscious effort to promote pro-social, positive character development among students (Brannon, 2008). Lickona and Davidson (as cited by Schwartz et al, 2006) described the students produced by effective character education programs as lifelong learners, critical and ethical thinkers, diligent and capable performers, socially and emotionally skilled persons, respectful and responsible moral agents, and self-disciplined persons who pursue a healthy lifestyle. These students were contributing community members and democratic citizens as well as spiritual persons engaged in crafting a life of noble purpose.

Quality character education was good education. It encompassed not only virtue and moral development but also central tenets of the overall spectrum of education.

Character education has been demonstrated to be associated with academic motivation and aspirations, academic achievement, pro-social behavior, bonding to school, pro-social and democratic values, conflict-resolution skills, moral-reasoning maturity, responsibility, respect, self-efficacy, self-control, self-esteem, social skills, and trust in and respect for teachers. Furthermore, effective character education has been demonstrated to reduce absenteeism, discipline referrals, pregnancy, school failure, suspensions, school anxiety, and substance use. Clearly, when it is effective, it works. (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004, p.75).

Character Education and Academic Performance

State and federal governments expected schools to place primary emphasis on academic achievement. Accordingly, educators had questioned how character education can fit into this high stakes environment. Research had shown that quality character education led to students who were good citizens that were academically successful. In a recent study by Benninga et al (2006), results showed that among 120 California elementary schools, “character education was positively associated with academic achievement, both across academic domains and over time” (p.450). Studies from around the world have shown the positive correlation between social-emotional intelligence and academic performance (Bar-On, 2003). School success, as evidenced by students’ attitudes and behaviors, were a result of comprehensive social and emotional learning programs. These components led to an increased commitment to academic achievement (Zins, et al, 2004).

Character Education and School Climate

School climate had its roots in organizational climate research and school affects studies. The definition of school climate has varied, ranging from broad statements like the overall feeling and perceptions of a school to lists of components (Stevens & Sanchez, 1999). Because so many variables of a school can be reflected in its climate, many studies were done to try and capture the pieces of the causes and effects of school climate. These studies used three major theories to support the research: input-output, sociological, and ecological (Anderson, 1982). Ecological theory supported a combination of input-output theory as well as the social and cultural components of sociological theory. It looked at how the school functions as a whole with all variables having the ability to be modified (Anderson, 1982). A few of those variables were the social, emotional, ethical, and academic parts of a child's education. Character education promoted social-emotional competencies and ethical beliefs through "interventions designed to create a safe, caring, participatory, and responsive school" (Cohen, 2006, p.209). These competencies and beliefs were foundational to a school's climate. Berkowitz & Bier (2004) looked at school climate as the critical mediating factor of how effective a school's character education program would be. Therefore, if school climate was a measure of the positive and/or negative feelings about the school environment and if character education promoted a safe and caring environment, it would seem to follow that character education would be positively related to school climate. Cohen (2006) reinforced this when he said, "Evaluating school climate can be a powerful first step that forces us to question the very basis of what we are doing" (p.213). After evaluating a school's climate, usually

by administering some kind of survey to students, staff, and sometime parents, the school would then be able to concentrate on what is needed for improvement. This was where many ideas and programs proposed implementing some kind of character education (Peterson & Skiba, 2001).

Successful Program Components

The CEP, Character Education Partnership, came up with eleven principles that outlined effective character education practices. According to the CEP website (CEP, 2008, How does character education work?),

Based on research by the nation's leading character education experts, CEP's Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education provide guidelines for the elements needed for effective, comprehensive, character education. These include (1) Promotes core ethical values, (2) Teaches students to understand, care about, and act upon these core ethical values, (3) Encompasses all aspects of the school culture, (4) Fosters a caring school community, (5) Offers opportunities for moral action, (6) Supports academic achievement, (7) Develops intrinsic motivation, (8) Includes whole-staff involvement, (9) Requires positive leadership of staff and students, (10) Involves parents and community members, and (11) Assesses results and strives to improve.

In addition, there were a variety of methods to deliver these components. Popular methods of delivery included teacher role modeling, reading stories, student recognition, specific character education curriculum, community service projects, community newsletters, special events and assemblies, monthly character traits, and bulletin boards (Zins et al, 2004; Glazner & Milson, 2006; Brannon, 2008; Schwartz

et al, 2006; Prestwich, 2004). Most research concurred that the most effective strategies for successfully implementing comprehensive, effective, and sustainable character education programs hinged on administrative, staff, parent, and community buy in. This included a school-wide approach, involving families and the community, and required staff development and training (Brannon, 2008; Schwartz et al, 2006; Berkowitz & Bier, 2004).

Concerns and Considerations

“The effectiveness of any character education program rests on effective implementation of the program” (Prestwich, 2004, p. 146). As previously discussed, there were many methods of implementation and a variety of components to consider when developing a comprehensive character education program. Teacher training, commitment, efficacy, and effectiveness were key components in the success of any educational program. Revell & Arthur's (2007) research on student teachers' attitudes toward and experiences with character and values education in schools showed that there was a weakness in teacher training when it came to moral and character education. There were policy expectations that teachers facilitate student's character development but because of poor definitions of what character education was, this ambiguity was then reflected in teacher training at universities.

When teachers did choose to include character education in their classrooms, they faced challenges such as a school or district that was not supportive, lack of time and materials, administrators that did not want to take time away from core subject areas, or parents who were uncomfortable with teachers educating their children about morals. Philosophical differences may also arise (Brannon, 2008). Then there

was the question of which curriculum to choose. There were many programs that called themselves “character education” but varied greatly in purpose and scope (Benninga, 2006). And when a school or district did subscribe to a character education program, there was a concern if the staff had adequate training in that program, if it was comprehensive in its approach, if the students were getting adequate exposure, and if it was sustainable (Glanzer & Milson, 2006; Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). Finally, character education must be able to show that it works. “The outcomes of character education are difficult to measure. Most studies either have referred to the results of specific commercial programs or have relied heavily on anecdotal evidence” (Schwartz, 2006, p.26). In recent years, more and more research had explored the effects of character education on students and school success. Benniga, et al (2006) showed that indicators such as safe, clean school environments, positive parent and teacher role models, meaningful ways to contribute to the school and community, and an overall caring community increased students’ success academically and social/emotionally. Berkowitz, et al (2004) believed that more research is needed to determine how and when character education is most effective.

Conclusion

Although it was called by different names and came in many forms, there was a worldwide call for character education in the educational system. The United Kingdom issued a statement of values developed by the National Forum for Values in Education and the Community, which was used as a base for their school teaching (National Forum, 1997). At a seminar comprised of countries taking part in the International Review of Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks project, it was

determined “that concern with aspects of student behavior provides a powerful stimulus for what might be called ‘character development and training’ ” (Le Metais, 1997, p. 18). Secretary of Education Rod Paige outlined the need for character education programs on a new U.S. Department of Education character education website (Benninga, et al, 2006). “There is a concern for universal public education which will teach people to think independently and creatively and to avoid subservience to the will of others” (Le Metais, 1997).

While there were valid concerns of how to implement the most effective comprehensive approach to character education, the research pointed to the overall importance and value of character education. After Zins, et al. (2004) extensive examination of social and emotional development, it was determined that “there is a growing body of scientifically based research supporting the strong impact that enhanced social and emotional behaviors can have on success in school and ultimately in life”(p.19). Thanks to the rapid growth of public awareness and support, as well as the increased amount of research being compiled, character education was on its way to becoming part of the everyday educational landscape.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Character Education's Relationship to School Climate

How did elementary school children feel about their school? Did character education play a role in the development of those feelings? These were the questions this study set out to examine. Character education and school climate were two pieces of education today that played just as large a role in student learning as traditional academics, such as reading and writing. If students do not feel happy and safe in school, they cannot perform to their potential. Character education, in the form of 45-minute, bi-weekly lessons taught in the classroom, centering on themes such as respect, responsibility, and honesty may have fostered a sense of security and belonging in school. This study of four years of school climate data looked to shed light on any connections between positive feelings toward school and character lessons learned.

Setting and Participants

Northwestern Wisconsin was a very rural area. The School District of Maple was geographically one of the largest districts in Wisconsin covering 500 square miles. Approximately 5,500 people lived in the area serviced by the district. Overall, the general population of the area was Caucasian with most families being in the middle to low socioeconomic level. There were two elementary schools within the district, Northwestern Elementary School and Iron River Elementary School. Northwestern Elementary School (NES) served approximately 500 students in grades Kindergarten-5th and was located in Poplar, WI. Iron River Elementary School (IR)

was located in Iron River, WI and served approximately 140 students in grades Kindergarten-5th.

Character Education was taught by the Guidance Counselor to all grades K-5 in both buildings. Each grade level participated in Guidance every other week for 45-minute lessons. Character lessons were based on a theme-a-month program. The character themes for each month were as follows:

- September - Friendship
- October - Respect
- November - Thankfulness/Appreciation
- December - Kindness/Generosity
- January - Responsibility
- February - Perseverance
- March - Honesty
- April - Acceptance/Tolerance
- May - Character Review

Another piece of the Guidance program was monitoring school climate. Each May for the past five years, beginning in 2005, all third, fourth, and fifth graders in each elementary school took a school climate survey. There were approximately 100 students, 80 at NES and 20 at IR that took this survey in each grade level 3rd-5th each year. All responses to the number one and number two open-ended questions from all 3rd-5th graders for the past five years were used for this project. Using all responses provided a more clear, detailed, and accurate portrait of the students at these elementary schools and how they felt about being there. Another benefit to using four

years of data was that students who took the survey last year, 2009, had been receiving character education lessons for five years while students taking the survey four years ago, 2005, had only been receiving character education lessons for one year. This provided a longitudinal look at the data to gain information and determine trends.

Because the researcher was the Elementary Guidance Counselor for the School District of Maple, and the school climate survey was administered as part of the regular educational curriculum, the IRB deemed this study as exempt from review under federal guidelines. On October 23, 2009, the IRB: Human Subject Committee at the University of Minnesota, via email, gave approval to proceed with data analysis. This communication can be found in Appendix A.

Research Methods

The WINSS (Wisconsin's Information Network for Successful Schools) website (<http://dpi.wi.gov/sig/index.htm>) was created as an electronic resource for anyone interested in educating the hearts and minds of all students in Wisconsin. It was broken down into four components, one of which was Continuous School Improvement. It was in this section that the School Climate Survey was available. According to the WINNS website (<http://goal.learningpt.org/winss/scs/>) regarding the School Climate Survey for Students, "These surveys are designed for students in grades 3-12. They will help school improvement leaders assess student perceptions about their school." Because this survey was developed and promoted by the Wisconsin Department of Education and because of the need for accountability in schools, not only for academics but for behaviors and safety as well, Northwestern

Elementary School and Iron River Elementary School decided to use the WINSS School Climate Survey as the tool to gather information on student's feelings and perceptions of their school. An example of a student's survey results can be found in Appendix B.

Surveys were administered each year in May during a one-week window. After the testing window closed, the results were immediately available. Results from the Likert portion of the survey were given in graph form and results of the open-ended questions were given as a list divided by grade level. For the purposes of this study, two open-ended questions were used for data analysis. The questions analyzed were "What do you like about this school?" and "What do you wish were different about this school?" The third question available to students, "What do you wish I would have asked you about your school?" was not used as it was asked more for survey development purposes.

Data Gathering and Analysis

To make sense of nearly 1,000 responses to each open-ended question, answers to each question were coded by themes using content analysis. Themes were determined by the character themes taught during Guidance throughout the year. Content analysis was a research method that allowed researchers to make reliable and valid inferences from text. Results from content analysis provided insights, increased understanding, and informed actions (Krippendorff, 2004). Themes were looked for and identified within student responses, which allowed for qualitative inferences. Content analysis was most successful when it was rooted in facts of language. One of

these classes of facts according to Krippendorff (2004) was attribution. Attitudes, beliefs, and emotions were just a few attributes of behavior.

The attribution of competence, character, morality, success, and belongingness to particular categories of people enables or discourages actions, makes or breaks politicians, creates heroes and demonizes villains, identifies leaders and marginalizes minorities. These facts cannot exist without language, and to the extent that texts are instrumental in disseminating and creating such attributions, they are natural targets of successful content analyses (Krippendorff, 2004, p.76).

To sort through student responses, each character theme was given a color. When a theme was found in a response, the corresponding color designated the response. After multiple readings, responses were sorted into groups by color. Because the survey measured school climate, positive answers indicated positive feelings toward school and negative responses indicated negative feelings. All responses that contained character themes were sorted by theme. A theme was deemed significant for the purposes of this study if it was mentioned in at least three percent of the answers, which came out to approximately 40 responses out of the 1200 total responses. This led to the resulting inferences regarding the effects of character education on school climate.

Summary

Schools needed safe environments conducive to learning. Students wanted their voices to be heard. The results of this research provided valuable information addressing both of these needs. The following chapter discusses student responses,

character themes found in those responses, and inferences made through analysis regarding students' feelings about school and how character education possibly impacted those responses.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

The purpose of this study was to look at the possible relationship between school climate and character education. Third through fifth graders in two elementary schools took a school climate survey in May of each year. Five years worth of school climate data gathered through the school climate survey was qualitatively analyzed using content analysis. Themes were determined from character traits introduced and taught to students each year at the elementary schools studied. The following chapter will present the results of this content analysis, discuss, and summarize the findings.

Results

The WINSS (Wisconsin's Information Network for Successful Schools) website offered a School Climate Survey to aid schools in determining the overall climate or feeling of the students in their building. The survey consisted of Likert scale questions as well as three open-ended questions. For the purposes of this study, responses to two of the open-ended questions were of greatest importance. The two questions analyzed were 1) What do you like about this school? and 2) What do you wish were different at this school? Responses to both of these questions were gathered from the consecutive years 2005-2009. The total number of responses from both Iron River Elementary School (IR) and Northwestern Elementary School (NES) are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1***Total Student Responses to Questions #1 & #2 for Years 2005-2009***

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Totals
NES #1	234	216	231	27	185	1113
NES #2	226	210	228	239	183	1086
IR #1	52	53	53	76	82	316
IR #2	51	52	45	71	82	301

For all five years, there were 1429 combined responses from both IR and NES for question #1 and 1387 combined responses for question #2.

Themes

Prior to looking at the data, themes were chosen to help make inferences from the student responses. Because this study was looking at relationships between school climate and character education, the themes were monthly character traits taught to all elementary students. After the themes were chosen, the responses to each question were read and re-read to find possible themes. As the data were scrutinized, certain words and phrases became apparent which connected to a specific theme.

Occasionally, student responses contained more than one theme. In these cases, each theme included in the response was counted. Table 2 as shown below describes the themes and common words or phrases used to match the response to a theme.

Table 2***Character Themes with Their Matching Words and Phrases***

Theme	Question #1 common words/phrases	Question #2 common words/phrases
Friendship	friends, bff, friendly	friends, friendly
Respect	respect, treated well, good behavior	bullies, bad behavior, rude behavior
Thankful	thankful, appreciate, happy to be here	thankful, appreciate, happy to be here
Kind	kind, nice, caring	mean
Giving	support, helping, giving, understanding	don't care
Responsible	safe, choices, freedom, learning, hard work, rules	freedom, choices, do what we want, make decisions
Honesty	honest, truthful, trust	honest, tell the truth, trust
Perseverance	challenging, keep working, try hard	challenging, give up
Acceptance	likes me for who I am, equal, fair, welcomed	teased, called names, left out

Examples of Themes in Student Responses

To give the reader a better understanding of how these themes manifested in the students' responses, the following section will give examples of student responses to each question for each of the themes listed above. For the first question, the students were asked to respond to the question, "What do you like about this school?"

"Playing outside with my friends at recess" (Friendship)

"I like it because it has some nice people in it" (Kind)

"All the cool friends I have!" (Friendship)

"That whenever I do something good in the classroom I get a happy feeling.

That when I first moved here I felt welcomed." (Acceptance)

"I like how the teachers respect and help us with our work" (Respect)

"The rules. They are fair about all the rules. You learn really good."

(Responsible)

"What I like about this school is that I get treated equally" (Acceptance)

"I like the support we get from our teachers." (Giving)

"Well I am happy that I am going to this school and that I have an awesome teacher. The staff is extremely awesome." (Thankful)

"I like that you can play football and that we try hard to do our best here."

(Perseverance)

The second question the students were asked to respond to was, "What do you wish were different at this school?"

"I wish that the people on the bus would be nicer to little kids. And recess longer." (Kind)

"Everyone treated =" (Acceptance)

"I think that we should get longer recesses and get more freedom, because 5th graders don't get a lot of freedom" (Responsibility)

"I wish nobody would fight" (Respect)

"I could have more friends here" (Friendship)

"...If the kids could have some say so if a kid says another kid punched him.

The kid that said that said the other kid punched him could be lying. You

never know who is telling the truth. Your eyes and ears can trick you..."

(Honesty)

"Star students could learn things that are challenging to them in selected areas...." (Perseverance)

Putting It All Together

After coding all student responses by theme, percentages were determined by dividing the number of times a theme was counted by the total number of responses to the question. Tables 2, 3, and 4 below show each theme's percentage of the total responses to each question.

Nearly twenty percent of Iron River Elementary students responded with Kindness as what they liked most about their school. Friendship was mentioned in ten percent of student responses, and Respect and Responsibility followed each with seven percent of responses. Kindness was also what students wished were different as shown by eleven percent of responses to question #2. Respect and Responsibility rounded out the top three with Respect being found in nine percent of responses and Responsibility in seven percent of responses.

Table 2***Iron River Elementary Theme Responses and Percentages of Totals for Questions #1 & #2***

IR 2005-2009	Question #1 responses (%)	Question #2 responses (%)
Kindness	59 (19%)	33(11%)
Respect	22 (7%)	26 (9%)
Friendship	33 (10%)	8 (3%)
Acceptance	13 (4%)	9 (3%)
Giving	16 (5%)	0
Responsibility	21 (7%)	20 (7%)
Perseverance	1 (.3%)	0
Thankful	0	0
Honesty	0	0

Northwestern Elementary students believed both Kindness and Friendship to be what they liked most about their school with Kindness found in sixteen percent of responses and Friendship in fifteen percent of responses. Themes found in the highest percentages of responses regarding what students wished were different were Kindness, Respect, and Responsibility with twelve, ten, and seven percent respectively.

Table 3***Northwestern Elementary Theme Responses and Percentages of Totals for Questions #1 & #2***

NES 2005-2009	Question #1 responses (%)	Question #2 responses (%)
Kindness	184(16%)	135 (12%)
Respect	47 (4%)	113(10%)
Friendship	166(15%)	7 (.6%)
Acceptance	34 (3%)	26 (2%)
Giving	35 (3%)	0
Responsibility	66 (6%)	75 (7%)
Perseverance	9 (.8%)	1 (.1%)
Thankful	2 (.2%)	0
Honesty	0	1 (.1%)

When combined, Iron River and Northwestern Elementary students' responses showed Kindness and Friendship as being what they liked most about their schools. These themes were found in seventeen and fourteen percent of responses. Kindness was also found in twelve percent of student responses to what they wished were different about their school. Respect was found in ten percent of student responses to question #2.

Table 4***Iron River and Northwestern Elementary Theme Responses and Percentages of Totals for Questions #1 & #2***

IR/NES 2009	combined	2005-	Question #1 responses (%)	Question #2 responses (%)
Kindness			243 (17%)	168 (12%)
Respect			69 (5%)	139(10%)
Friendship			199 (14%)	15 (1%)
Acceptance			47 (3%)	35 (2%)
Giving			51 (3%)	0
Responsibility			87 (6%)	95 (7%)
Perseverance			9 (.6%)	1 (.1%)
Thankful			2 (.1%)	0
Honesty			0	1 (.1%)

The data showed that whether combining the two elementary schools or keeping them separated the major themes remained similar. For most third, fourth, and fifth graders attending these two elementary schools, kindness and friendship were key to their positive feelings of school climate, while kindness and respect were key to what they wished were different. Responsibility as a theme, either being used positively as learning a lot in school or negatively as wanting more choice and freedom, was also mentioned in more than five percent of all responses. In the next chapter, inferences were made by using the most significant themes and what that means for educators and schools today.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion and Conclusion

The education of our children today was one of the top priorities of not only families and schools but of the government as well. If we want our students to be successful, we need to know what they think. This survey went to the heart of the matter by asking students what they liked about school and what they wished would change. Pulling character themes from those responses helped us to understand just what is important to kids today when they are at school. These results had implications for how we structure our education system today. This was especially important at this point in time when the government was on the verge of making big changes to the current education policy of No Child Left Behind.

Positive Feelings Toward School

School climate was how a student feels about school. The first question in the survey asked the students what they liked about their school. All responses designated positive feelings about school; this could have been the people, the building, the work, or anything else that made a positive impact on the student. Kindness, friendship, and responsibility were mentioned most out of all the themes. Kindness was defined as a kind act. Dictionary.net defined kind as, "showing tenderness or goodness; disposed to do good and confer happiness; averse to hurting or pain; benevolent; benignant; gracious." Merriam Webster online (2010) showed friendship as, "the state of being friends" with friends meaning, "one attached to another by affection or esteem." Responsibility was being responsible, and Merriam Webster

online (2010) had several definitions of responsible all surrounding the theme of being answerable, but the definition best fitting this study was, "able to answer for one's conduct and obligations; trustworthy; able to choose for oneself between right and wrong."

Kindness was determined by responses including words like, "nice" or "caring." The vast majority of answers sounded like this third grader's response, "I like my teacher" or this fifth grader's response, "It's fun." Since these types of responses didn't specifically say why the student liked their teacher or what made school fun, they could not be coded with a character theme. So when looking through responses when a student would say something like, "I have a nice teacher," or "My teacher cares about me," this indicated one reason they liked school was because of a kind teacher.

Finding responses that talked about friendship as being important to why the student liked school was straightforward. Responses almost always included the word "friend" as in this fourth grader's response, "Recess and friends." In some cases responses had more than one theme embedded within it. "I have a lot of friends who care about me" was a fourth grader's response who mentioned that not only did he/she feel good about his/her friends, but those friends also were caring. Caring was a key word to determine the theme of kindness so this response showed the importance of both friendship and kindness.

Responsibility was more difficult to pinpoint a common phrase or words to designate this theme. Students mentioned specific subjects in their responses, like this

fifth grader who said, "Gym, Art, and Guidance." These types of answers were common but not specific enough to determine why the student liked those specific subjects. Was it the subject itself? How it was taught? Was it the teacher? Instead, responses that fit the theme of responsibility gave the sense of wanting to learn, improving in school, feeling like he/she was trusted, feeling safe, and feeling like there were choices and freedom. This fifth grader's response, "I like how the teachers treat us with respect and our teachers believe in us" showed a student who feels respected and trusted, which was a key component of responsibility.

What Could Be Different?

Interestingly enough, the theme with the highest percentage for the question asking what could be different at your school was the same as the theme for what was most positive. Kindness was again what the students chose only in this case it was to verbalize what they wished could be better. In addition to kindness, respect was also high on the wish list of things that could change in school. Rounding out the top three was again, responsibility. Because kindness and responsibility had already been defined, the definition fitting best for respect came from yourdictionary.com (2010) which stated respect as a transitive verb, "to feel or show honor or esteem for; hold in high regard; to consider or treat with deference or dutiful regard; to show consideration for; avoid intruding upon or interfering with others' privacy; to concern with or relate to."

In some cases when students responded to this question, they were specifically naming one student who they wished would be more kind. For example, these two

third grade students both named the same student (T) and that student's behavior that they wished would change. "I wish B would stop pushing me and my friends around and telling me who can be my friends and I wish T would stop using the h word." "T and R would stop teasing me and K." There were specific teachers, namely the outside duty or recess teachers that were brought up frequently as well with similar wishes of what would be different from several students. "The recess person was more nicer," "I want to be able to wear heelys and the outside teachers have to be nice," "That the outside teachers were nicer." The rest of the responses expressed general concerns like this third grade student, "That kids were nicer."

Respect was very similar to kindness in that both are ways you can be treated. Respect was separated out from kindness by focusing on responses that expressed feelings of being treated badly or being bullied. Since these two words were so closely related, it is not surprising that these two themes had the highest percentages of responses. Also included in respect was respect of property. There were several responses indicating that the students wished there was more respect in the bathroom, as stated by this fifth grade student, "I wish that we could have more breaks and we had bigger lockers and the people who are ruining our bathrooms could stop." "If there was something different about this school I would like it if the bathroom stalls wouldn't say things on them," was how another fifth grade student responded.

By and large, however, most responses coded for respect had to do with how kids were being teased or bullied. Most were not specific and just alluded to being bullied, like this third grader who said, "That there were no bullies." However, some

responses were very specific telling how the student was being teased, as this fourth grader stated,

I wish that my teacher does not give us so much homework every day. I also wish people will stop picking on me like the first day of school one person said she did not like me just because I don't have nice clothes like her when I went home I cried a long time.

There was a feeling of frustration in the responses dealing with respect. Students expressed the desire for both staff and students to be more respectful. A fifth grader summed up these feelings poignantly when he/she said,

Some of the kids that are in this school. I wonder why we go to those programs at the other school that teach us about bullies and teasing, cause there are some kids that go there and watch but they really don't get it how peoples' feelings could really get hurt and it makes me wonder if they will ever learn how it feels.

Freedom. Choices. The two words that come out of kids mouths more and more as they grow older and move through their developmental stages. According to Erik Erickson, children go through stages of development. Successful navigation of each stage sets the course for the next stage of development. During the pre-adolescent ages, children were working on a sense of industry. They were figuring out what they were good at, what skills they had, and gained feelings of a job well done when they were successful. This led then to the stage of puberty and

adolescence when children were figuring out who they were. They were establishing a sense of identity. Understanding these stages of development helped make sense of the expression of desires for freedom and choice as what students would change in their school. (Salkind, 2004).

Third graders were less likely to express a desire for more freedom and choice than fifth graders. Wanting more responsibility came out differently as shown by these responses. "I wish I had more things to do in school." "I wish we can have more choices at school." "I wish we had a little more freedom and I would also like more things to do outside." And then there was the problem with rules. Several students lamented the fact they could not do what they wanted. A fifth grader expressed that need for industry when he/she said,

I think there are way too much rules like if someone gets hurt it's their fault because they chose to do that. I think teachers shouldn't be so careful. I think we should practice on sports in gym not Frisbee or anything that's not a sport because it's a waste of time and it's extremely boring. I hate other things we do in gym that aren't sports. I think we should learn more about basketball in gym too because a lot of kids play basketball as a sport. And in art I don't think we should ever have free draw because it is boring and you don't learn anything. I think lots of stuff could change in our school.

Educational Implications

This study looked at data from five years worth of responses to a school climate survey taken by third through fifth graders of two schools in northern

Wisconsin. These students used their own words to describe what they liked about their school and what they wished was different. With kindness, friendship, respect, and responsibility being mentioned in over 5% of the total responses, this study revealed the importance of including character education in addition to academics when determining the best way to educate the whole child. Students expressed the need to be treated nicely, respectfully, and the desire to be cared for and about at school. They described how it felt to be treated poorly and how it felt to be disrespected and bullied.

Character education was the idea that students should not only be taught academic skills. To succeed academically and to become contributing members of society, students must also be taught the concepts of respect, responsibility, acceptance, and perseverance. The responses from these survey questions emphasized this idea. The vast majority of responses did not say they wanted more math or they liked learning about the civil war. The students spoke out on what they liked and did not like, most of those having something to do with how they were treated at school.

When President Obama gave his Back to School Speech in Arlington, Virginia on September 8, 2009, he used words found in these students' responses. He talked about the responsibility students have for their education and their responsibilities to themselves. He mentioned that students might not have money or support or are being pressured but that decisions must be made to do the right thing and not use those as excuses for not trying. He called on all students to set educational goals for themselves-ranging from getting all their homework done to

standing up for someone who is getting teased or bullied because of their looks or beliefs. If we do not teach character to our students, how can they achieve these goals? The President's speech was sprinkled with character words from beginning to end. Can we use these words without teaching their meaning? And if students are taught these words, can they put them to good use if they don't feel safe or respected at school? That was why in the 21st Century Schools provision of the No Child Left Behind Act there were both sections on Character Education and Safe and Drug Free Schools. Students needed to learn how to be good citizens in a safe environment that was conducive to learning (Whitehouse.gov, 2009).

The results of this study showed the importance of including character education and school climate in the education discussion, specifically during this time of re-authorizing ESEA, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. We wanted students to be successful not just in school but also in life. As Zins (2007) noted, education needed to recognize "that addressing students' social and emotional development is not an additional duty charged to schools along with academic instruction, but rather is an integral and necessary aspect to helping all students succeed" (p.5).

Recommendations for Future Research

Gaining insight into students' thoughts and feelings was a great privilege. Because students' responses only provided a glimpse into what they were thinking, it would have been interesting to be able to ask more about what they meant by their response so as to get more information. Interviews with students would have been

helpful in obtaining more information. Including the Likert-scale data would have also provided more information. Knowing how much of a priority academic achievement was to the government, it would have also been beneficial to have statewide testing scores included to look for any relationship between feelings about school and academic achievement. Together, the Likert data, open-ended responses, and academic data would have given a more complete picture of relationships between school climate, character education, and academic achievement. These two schools received the same character education lessons as a part of the Guidance curriculum. Including two other schools that either did not offer character education or offered it in a different way and having students respond to the school climate survey would have provided useful information as well.

Another question this study brought up is how adequately schools are prepared to teach character education and improve their school climate. This would require teachers, counselors, social workers, and administrative leadership who were trained and educated in best practices in regards to implementing character education. Research should be done on counselor, teacher, and administrative education programs to see what kind of training these educators are receiving when it comes to character education, school climate, and social-emotional learning.

Conclusions

While this study showed the importance as viewed by students of kindness, respect, friendship, and responsibility, there was most likely not a point where a school could say they had achieved a perfect school climate. There would always be

the need for students to learn how to be kind, respectful, and responsible. This was human nature. What became important was the promotion, passion, and execution of good character education, which led to the most positive experiences for all students. This needed to be at all levels: home, schools, colleges, and government. If one wanted to know how a child felt about school, ask them. They would express what they needed, and then it would be the job of educators, parents, volunteers, and government officials to then do something about it.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Communication

Date: Fri, 23 Oct 2009 15:01:41 -0500 [10/23/2009 03:01:41 PM CST]
From: irb@umn.edu
To: lthompsl@umn.edu
Subject: 0910E73694 - PI Thompson - IRB - Exempt Study Notification
TO : kriordan@umn.edu, lthompsl@umn.edu,

The IRB: Human Subjects Committee determined that the referenced study is exempt from review under federal guidelines 45 CFR Part 46.101(b) category #4 EXISTING DATA; RECORDS REVIEW; PATHOLOGICAL SPECIMENS.

Study Number: 0910E73694

Principal Investigator: Lori Thompson

Title(s): The "Value" of Character Education in Regards to School Climate

This e-mail confirmation is your official University of Minnesota RSPP notification of exemption from full committee review. You will not receive a hard copy or letter. This secure electronic notification between password protected authentications has been deemed by the University of Minnesota to constitute a legal signature.

The study number above is assigned to your research. That number and the title of your study must be used in all communication with the IRB office.

If you requested a waiver of HIPAA Authorization and received this e-mail, the waiver was granted. Please note that under a waiver of the HIPAA Authorization, the HIPAA regulation [164.528] states that the subject has the right to request and receive an accounting of Disclosures of PHI made by the covered entity in the six years prior to the date on which the accounting is requested.

If you are accessing a limited Data Set and received this email, receipt of the Data Use Agreement is acknowledged.

This exemption is valid for five years from the date of this correspondence and will be filed inactive at that time. You will receive a notification prior to inactivation. If this research will extend beyond five years, you must submit a new application to the IRB before the study's expiration date.

Upon receipt of this email, you may begin your research. If you have questions, please call the IRB office at (612) 626-5654. You may go to the View Completed section of eResearch Central at <http://eresearch.umn.edu/> to view further details on your study.

The IRB wishes you success with this research.

Appendix B

Sample School Climate Survey Results

Results

Here are the results for the Demo Data project that ran from 3/26/2003 to 3/27/2003.

Elementary Survey**What do you like about this school?****Grade 3:**

Nuthin

recess

Grade 4:

I like my teachers. I like lunch. I like recess. I like my princeple. I like reading, math, and spelling. I like Tommy.

Everything!

Mr. Jenkins is the best teacher in the whole wide world! I love him!

lunch, gym, and recess

I like that my teachers don't give us much homework.

Grade 5:

Tests and quizzes.

What do you wish were different at this school?**Grade 3:**

I wish we had more time at recess.

I don't want to be in trouble all the time.

Grade 4:

i wish mr. jenkins was teaching 5th grade so that i could have him as my teacher next year too.

Nothing

i wish the school had a zoo

I wish i was the teacher. Then we wouldn't have to do math. I hate math. I'll never use math, so why do I have to learned it?

Grade 5:

I wish I was the only in the school. I hate all the other kids. Their mean and they pick on me. I hate them.